Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,
Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be,
A text we should be born that we might read,
More explicit than the experience of sun
And moon, the book of reconciliation,
Book of a concept only possible
In description, canon central in itself,
The thesis of the plentifullest John.¹

Introductory

On a certain level of abstraction, cities (very large cities in particular) can feel rather similar in terms of what Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s called “a sociology of the everyday,” and Rem Koolhaas in the 1980s described as “the generic city.”² Yet I would like to argue that each city remains unique as a site for the particularity of experience, in terms both of the

history of changes it has undergone and of what it feels, sounds, and smells like to live in it from day to day. The poetry of cities captures this quality of difference in similarity. It is especially attentive to how individual experience is woven into the web of energies that constitutes the life of a city. In this essay, I would like to address the experience of urban spaces, as represented by Arun Kolatkar (1932–2004), an author with a distinctive urban sensibility, whose writing adds up to an oddly insightful chronicle of what it meant to have lived in Bombay (or Mumbai, as it was renamed in 1995) during the latter half of the twentieth century, and, more particularly, to have lived in it during the 1960s and 1970s, before the onset of the episodic ethnic and political violence to which its history has been prone from the 1990s.3

Kolatkar’s twenty-eight *Kala Ghoda Poems*,4 which take up slightly over a hundred pages of text and were published in 2004, constitute an implicit poetics of urbanism that has much to startle and distract, especially those among us who are more comfortable with a conventional or academic approach to urban studies.5 What, you might ask, are the chief features of Kolatkar’s urban poetics?

this view: “It is undeniable that certain generic urban forms and architectural designs are visible in city after city across the world. Shopping malls, cafes, restaurants, multiplex theaters, entertainment complexes, tall office towers, and apartment buildings dot the urban landscape worldwide. These are spaces that invoke a feeling of placelessness”; Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010): 21. Yet, as I argue with Kolatkar in mind, these generalizations do not take account of the kind of particularity that the *Kala Ghoda Poems* demonstrate, grounding the sense of the urban in a very specific and unique environment.

3 The city has rung the changes on many names through its history as noted by Suketu Mehta: “It was called Heptanesia – the city of seven islands – by Ptolemy in A.D. 150. The Portuguese called it Bom Bahia, Buon Bahia, or Bombaim – Portuguese for ‘good bay.’ In 1538, they also called it Boa-Vida, the island of good life, because of its beautiful groves, its game, and its abundance of food. Another story about its name concerns the Sultan Kutb-ud-din, Mubarak Shah I, who ruled over the islands in the fourteenth century, demolished temples, and became a demon: Mumba Rakshasa. Other Hindu names for these islands were Manbai, Mambai, Mambe, Mumbadevi, Bambai, and now Mumbai”; Suketa Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006): 15.


5 The publication of *Kala Ghoda Poems* brought together part of Kolatkar’s work in English from the last three decades of his life. He had been writing ambidextrously in two languages (English and Marathi) since the 1950s, but he was habitually reluctant to publish, until persuaded by friends and impending mortality to finally put most of his writing into print in the final year of his life. Six volumes were published in 2004. In Marathi: *Chirimiri* [“Small Change”]; *Bhijki Vahi* [“Wet Notebook”]; *Droan* [name of a character in *The Mahabharata*]; in English: *Kala Ghoda Poems*;